

CONGRESSMAN SHERWOOD BOEHLERT (R-NY)
OPENING STATEMENT FOR WTC HEARING
October 26, 2005

I want to welcome everyone to this important hearing, this Committee's third on the tragic collapse of the World Trade Center, but probably not our last. I want to promise (and perhaps warn) everyone at the outset that this Committee will be closely monitoring the follow-up to the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) report on the events of September 11.

That means we will be watching what NIST does, what other federal agencies do, and what the code writing organizations do. We are obviously not technical experts, but we will be making sure that the recommendations are considered fully and thoroughly, that NIST is doing everything necessary to back up those recommendations, and that any decisions are fully justified by the facts.

The issues raised in NIST's report go far beyond a single, horrific terrorist incident, and indeed beyond terrorism as a phenomenon. The report raises fundamental questions about what we know about the behavior of buildings and their contents, what we know about the behavior of individuals in emergencies, and about whether buildings are well enough designed for any large emergency. This is not about making every building strong enough to survive a plane crash.

That said, NIST's conclusion that the Trade Center buildings could have survived even the massive insult of a plane crash if the fireproofing had remained in place is at once both chilling and promising – chilling because the massive loss of life was not inevitable; promising because it is an indication we can do more to protect lives in the future.

This Committee will be asking hard questions of all our witnesses today to make sure we do take all reasonable steps to protect lives. We will be looking into whether NIST's recommendations are written in a way that will facilitate their adoption by code groups. It appears that they do not. We will be probing whether code groups are prepared to fully and fairly review the recommendations. On that, while the initial indications in today's testimony are promising, the jury necessarily is still out.

But our tough questions should not obscure the debt of gratitude we owe to NIST. NIST took seriously the mandate this Committee and the nation gave it in the National Construction Safety Team Act, and assembled an impressive group of experts that produced a comprehensive and impressive report. But our focus now has to be on whether everyone is doing enough to translate the report into specific, concrete steps that will prevent future tragedies.

The protection of life is the highest responsibility of public officials. And our hearing today is about that responsibility, just as much as any hearing on the military or homeland security would be. But the process in this case is far more complex because of the way it involves the private sector and every level of government. But complexity is not an excuse for inaction.

Before I turn to Mr. Gordon, I just want to give a special welcome to Bill Jeffrey who is making his first public appearance before this Committee. I say "public appearance" because Dr. Jeffrey has long been a valued advisor to this Committee in his work at the Office of Science and Technology Policy, someone we have admired for his intelligence, open-mindedness, and candor.

We could not be more delighted with his appointment as the Director of NIST, and we very much look forward to continuing to work with him. Hopefully, after today, he will still feel that way about us. This isn't perhaps the topic any of us would have chosen for his "maiden" hearing, but there is none of greater importance. And this hearing underscores the importance of NIST, and its need for greater funding. But I won't get started on that subject now; we have more than enough to deal with today.

Mr. Gordon.